

## Book Review: Controversial, Distasteful or Necessary? Let's Talk about Rape

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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Jones, H. (2006). Book Review: Controversial, Distasteful or Necessary? Let's Talk about Rape. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(2), 172-174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050680601300209>

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possibilities. The first would be that women and groups of women remain for ever so problematic, so needy, as to merit eternally some kind of special treatment. The second, that women and groups of women at last overcome their problems and become, finally, equal. Are these the images of women we dream of?

A puzzling dilemma, perhaps recognized by those women who choose not to argue their claims from the perspective of equality and non-discrimination, but who defend their interests with arguments strictly related to the concrete features of single cases (as the child interest in a Spanish litigation case about child support, reported by Ruth Rubio-Marin). Were these women (and their lawyers, whose sex it would be interesting to know, and not only that of the judges!) wrong, or were they aware that equality is not the best way to express the centrality and full legitimacy of women's claims in the juridical discourse? In fact, they won, and their victory (Rubio-Marin notes) was perceived as a victory for women.

Thanks to the editors and authors for a book that helps to pose questions around the relevant theme of a feminist constitutional interpretation.

## REFERENCE

Giardini, Federica (2004) *Relazioni*. Rome: Luca Sossella.

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## CONTROVERSIAL, DISTASTEFUL OR NECESSARY? LET'S TALK ABOUT RAPE

Merril D. Smith, ed.  
*Encyclopedia of Rape*  
 Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004, 301 pp., ISBN 0-3133-2687-8

Can a four-lettered word really a merit an entire encyclopaedia? When that word is rape the answer has to be yes. If you take an interest in history, law, literature, cultural studies, criminology, in fact any facet of life connected to gendered relations, this book will prove a valuable addition to your bookshelves. To some extent it is not a conventional encyclopaedia: there are no tables, graphs, charts or illustrations. It is, however, a very readable series of cross-referenced articles that collectively provide insight into the issue of rape from a range of perspectives. The editor, Merrill D. Smith, clearly states that the book takes a US focus to the subject matter and this focus is generally adhered to throughout, although there are some entries of historical and cultural relevance that go beyond these limits.

Aimed at the general reader, the *Encyclopedia of Rape* is a compendium of easily accessible information on all aspects of rape. It is written in a jargon-free, straightforward style and features 186 entries written by 79 scholars covering concepts and key individuals, emphasizing the historical and practical, rather than the deeply theoretical. A chronology of rape history precedes the general entries and spans events from the pre-Christian Babylonian code of Hammurabi, which legislated on the guilt or innocence of rape victims determined by their marital status, to the trial of Marc Dutroux in Belgium in 2004. It also provides alphabetical and topical lists of entries, which help to save time for the browser who is unsure of

where to start. For the researcher, or the just plain curious, most entries include suggested additional readings and a resource guide in the back of the book provides a further reading list and lists of websites, organizations, films and documentaries. I did feel that this resource guide could have been rather more comprehensive: even as a UK-based criminologist, I have more US websites saved on my computer's 'favourites' list than are given here and the impression I had was that these four short pages might have been a late addition to the book.

Merril D. Smith notes in the Introduction that the idea of an encyclopaedia on rape may seem controversial. This was confirmed to me when I showed my copy to a colleague, whose immediate response was 'How distasteful!' I disagree. Far from distasteful, this volume is thoughtful, considered and above all, necessary. The entries are relevant and sensitively written. A typical entry is around a page long and packed with information. Ruth Graham's entry on the 'Feminist Movement' manages to craft into little more than a page and a half an overview and assessment of the role of feminism in establishing rape as a political issue in the US. A useful addition to the suggested reading for this entry would have been Susan Brownmiller's (1999) *In Our Time*. This would also provide further reading to Maria Bevacqua's entry 'Rape History in the United States: Twentieth Century'. This two-page entry should also be seen as a triumph of concise and interesting writing. Generally, entries tend to be descriptive rather than evaluative, but this is not out of place in an encyclopaedia where the aim is to provide short descriptors rather than offer lengthier analysis. I was disappointed that there were no specific entries for human rights or the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The human rights discourse is a recent but valuable addition to the toolbox on rape. The Convention has been used to good effect by feminists across the globe and has been heralded as a significant step in the development of international human rights for women. Explanation for the omission of such entries may be that the US has never ratified the Convention and so inclusion into this encyclopaedia may not have been high on the list of priorities.

Although, as stated earlier, entries tend towards description rather than evaluation, occasionally some critical awareness was needed to enhance descriptive entries. As an example, the entries on 'Rape Kit' by Jackie Grutsch McKinney and 'DNA Collection and Evidence' by Marcella Treviño would have been strengthened by making the point that forensic evidence can only prove or disprove sexual contact: forensic evidence cannot prove the key issue of consent. A cross-reference to the entry on 'Consent' would have provided further support for this point.

Perhaps there are two questions that you need to consider before investing in this book. First, how do you best absorb information? If it is visually then you may find the *Encyclopedia of Rape* uninspiring as there is nothing to break up the flow of textual entries. There are no diagrams, illustrations, media extracts or review questions. Second, you need to critically reflect on your own knowledge level. Undergraduate students and less experienced practitioners will find this a useful text, although do not forget that it is US based and so may not be of much relevance if you – or your work – are located elsewhere. For scholars, the *Encyclopedia of Rape* may still be seen as a useful reference text, particularly if the US is not your field of expertise and you want something broad in its scope. There is a lot of useful information here but if you are already well rehearsed in the issues, there is little critical analysis for you to get your teeth into.

Despite these criticisms, it remains the fact that the *Encyclopedia of Rape* accomplishes everything that we might legitimately expect of it. It provides a starting point for the study of an enormously complex area; it stimulates interest; and it

encourages its readers to seek out literature that provides further insights. In producing this text, Merril D. Smith has performed a significant service for scholars, students and practitioners interested in sexual violence. The *Encyclopedia of Rape* is a useful addition to the legal, political, historical and cultural literature on rape.

## REFERENCE

Brownmiller, Susan (1999) *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. London: Aurum Press.

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